

## Notes on the Summer Solstice

Along with the vernal and autumnal equinox, the summer and winter solstices are “quarter” days that track the movement of the sun through the sky. Unlike many other agricultural holidays (“cross-quarter days” that hold the eight-spoked calendar wheel), the solstices are days that are celebrated across all cultures that keep calendars, from China to the various American indigenous civilizations. In many cultures, there are a recurring set of resemblances that accompany the summer solstice: the flower, the crown, and the circle of flame.

In many parts of the world, the summer solstice begins a period of intense work that won't end until the final harvest on October 31. For this reason, the solstice is celebrated with a great number of successive feasts and offering fires. These feasts bring together communities in shared work and were intended to be generous gathering spaces to reach across differences of class. The fires were intended to protect and bless humans, animals, and crops against illness and bad fortune. The English word “bonfire” derives from these two uses: a “boon” fire that gifts us, and a “bane” fire that wards away evil. Relatedly, there are a great number of divining practices associated with the solstice intended to foretell the harvests and the health of the community.

Agriculturally, the summer solstice is the time around which we're first able to harvest flowering crops like squash and tomatoes, and grains like corn. We can focus more fully on these crops, moving away from leafy greens, who often prefer the cooler temperatures of late spring and early autumn. The solstice is also known for fierce waves of pests and disease that can decimate crops. In biodynamic agriculture, the solstice ends the first third of summer and, like the Babylonian zodiac, marks a period of air/light transitioning to water. In permacultural practice, the summer is best defined by behaviors that produce no waste. Trees are experiencing expansion rather than defense and dormancy. Their full canopies and lively roots are converting light and water into sugar for growth.

The solstice marks periods of transition and stillness, where the sun slows its transit, settling into a nadir or standing at a zenith. These “time-gates” therefore open into a half of the year marked by an increase of light or its decrease. These halves and their relationship tell a story: they make it obvious that time is a spiraling story, and that the calendar is a teacher. European traditions frame this story through many dichotomies: light relates to oak, the bull or the grain, and the color green; darkness is conveyed by holly, the stag, and the color red. Green and red relate most explicitly to the agricultural calendar, and how we take life in order to feed ourselves.

In many traditions throughout Afroeurasia, the summer solstice marks the period at which the earth and the sky/sun enter a union, and their union is crowned with a garland of flowers. The teacher Starhawk offers wisdom:

This is the myth: the poetic statement of a process that is seasonal, celestial, and psychological. Enacting the myth in ritual, we enact our own transformations, the constant birth, growth, culmination, and passing of our ideas, plans, work, relationships. Each loss, each change, even a happy one, turns life upside down. We each become the Hanged One: the herb hung up to dry, the carcass hung to cure, the Hanged Man of the Tarot, whose meaning is the sacrifice that allows one to move on to a new level of being.

If we are able to take time itself as our teacher, we can recognize the sacrifice that we make each year, simply by aging. The sacrifice allows us to grow in wisdom and insight.